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LADY FEATHERFLIGHT.¹

AN ENGLISH FOLK-TALE.

THE following tale was read at the Second International Folk-Lore Congress, London, October, 1891.² As the excellence of the version makes it of general interest, and as it was recorded by a member of the Society, it seems proper to give the story a place in this Journal.

A poor woman, living on the edge of a wood, came at last to where she found nothing in the cupboard of the next day's breakfast. She called her boy Jack, and said: "You must now go into the wide world; if you stay here, there will be two of us to starve. I have nothing for you but this piece of black bread. On the other side of the forest lies the world. Find your way to it, and gain your living honestly." With that she bade him good-by and he started. He knew the way some distance into the thickest of the forest, for he had often been there for fagots. But after walking all day, he saw no farm, path, or tree, and knew that he was lost. Still he travelled on and on, as long as the daylight lasted, and then lay down and slept.

The next morning he ate the black bread, and wandered on all day. At night he saw lights before him, and was guided by them to a large palace, where he knocked for a long time in vain. At last the door was opened, and a lovely lady appeared, who said as she saw him: "Go away as quickly as you can. My father will soon come home, and he will surely eat you." Jack said: "Can't you hide me, and give me something to eat, or I shall fall down dead at your door?"

At first she refused, but afterwards yielded to Jack's prayers, and told him to come in and hide behind the oven. Then she gave him food, and told him that her father was a giant, who ate men and women. Perhaps she could keep him overnight, as she had already supper prepared. After a while, the giant came banging at the door, shouting: "Featherflight, let me in; let me in!" As she opened the door he came in, saying: "Where have you stowed the man? I smelt him all the way through that wood." Featherflight said: "Oh father, he is nothing but a poor, little, thin boy! He would make but half a mouthful, and his bones would stick in your throat; and beside he wants to work for you; perhaps you can make

¹ Related to Mrs. J. B. Warner, now of Cambridge, Mass., by her aunt, Miss Elizabeth Hoar, Concord, Mass.

² *Papers and Transactions* (see Bibliographical Notes), pp. 40-64.

him useful. But sit down to supper now, and after supper I will show him to you."

So she set before him half of a fat heifer, a sheep, and a turkey, which he swallowed so fast that his hair stood on end. When he had finished, Featherflight beckoned to Jack, who came trembling from behind the oven. The giant looked at him scornfully and said: "Indeed, as you say, he is but half a mouthful. But there is room for flesh there, and we must fatten him up for a few days; meanwhile he must earn his victuals. See here, my young snip, can you do a day's work in a day?" And Jack answered bravely: "I can do a day's work in a day as well as another." So the giant said: "Well, go to bed now. I will tell you in the morning your work." So Jack went to bed, and Lady Featherflight showed him; while the giant lay down on the floor with his head in Featherflight's lap, and she combed his hair and brushed his head till he went fast asleep.

The next morning Jack was called bright and early, and was taken out to the farmyard, where stood a large barn, unroofed by a late tempest. Here the giant stopped and said: "Behind this barn you will find a hill of feathers; thatch me this barn with them, and earn your supper, and, look you! if it be not done when I come back to-night, you shall be fried in meal, and swallowed whole for supper." Then he left, laughing to himself as he went down the road.

Jack went bravely to work and found a ladder and basket; he filled the basket, and ran up the ladder, and then tried hard to make a beginning on the thatch. As soon as he placed a handful of feathers, half would fly away as he wove them in. He tried for hours with no success, until at last half of the hill was scattered to the four winds, and he had not finished a hand-breadth of the roof. Then he sat down at the foot of the ladder and began to cry, when out came Lady Featherflight, with the basket on her arm, which she set down at his feet, saying: "Eat now, and cry after. Meantime I will try to think what I can do to help you." Jack felt cheered, and went to work, while Lady Featherflight walked round the barn, singing as she went, —

"Birds of land and birds of sea,
Come and thatch this roof for me."

As she walked round the second time, the sky grew dark, and a heavy cloud hid the sun and came nearer and nearer to the earth, separating at last into hundreds and thousands of birds. Each, as it flew, dropped a feather on the roof, and tucked it neatly in; and when Jack's meal was finished the roof was finished, too.

Then Featherflight said: "Let us talk and enjoy ourselves till my father the giant comes home." So they wandered round the grounds

and the stables, and Lady Featherflight told of the treasure in the strong room, till Jack wondered why he was born without a sixpence. Soon they went back to the house, and Jack helped, and Lady Featherflight prepared supper, which to-night was fourteen loaves of bread, two sheep, and a jack-pudding, by way of finish, which would almost have filled the little house where Jack was born.

Soon the giant came home, thundered at the door again, and shouted, "Let me in, let me in!" Featherflight served him with the supper already laid, and the giant ate it with great relish. As soon as he had finished, he called to Jack, and asked him about his work. Jack said: "I told you I could do a day's work in a day as well as another. You'll have no fault to find." The giant said nothing, and Jack went to bed. Then, as before, the giant lay down on the floor with his head in Featherflight's lap. She combed his hair and brushed his head till he fell fast asleep. The next morning the giant called Jack into the yard, and looked at his day's work. All he said was: "This is not your doing," and he proceeded to a heap of seed, nearly as high as the barn, saying: "Here is your day's work. Separate the seeds, each into its own pile. Let it be done when I come home to-night, or you shall be fried in meal, and I shall swallow you, bones and all." Then the giant went off down the road, laughing as he went. Jack seated himself before the heap, took a handful of seeds, put corn in one pile, rye in another, oats in another, and had not begun to find an end of the different kinds when noon had come, and the sun was right over head. The heap was no smaller, and Jack was tired out, so he sat down, hugged his knees, and cried. Out came Featherflight, with a basket on her arm, which she put down before Jack, saying: "Eat now, and cry after." So Jack ate with a will, and Lady Featherflight walked round and round the heap, singing as she went, —

"Birds of earth and birds of sea,
Come and sort this seed for me."

As she walked round the heap for the second time, still singing, the ground about her looked as if it was moving. From behind each grain of sand, each daisy stem, each blade of grass, there came some little insect, gray, black, brown, or green, and began to work at the seeds. Each chose some one kind, and made a heap by itself. When Jack had finished a hearty meal, the great heap was divided into countless others; and Jack and Lady Featherflight walked and talked to their hearts' content for the rest of the day. As the sun went down the giant came home, thundered at the door again, and shouted: "Let me in; let me in!"

Featherflight greeted him with his supper, already laid, and he sat

down and ate, with a great appetite, four fat pigs, three fat pullets, and an old gander. He finished off with a jack-pudding. Then he was so sleepy he could not keep his head up; all he said was, "Go to bed, youngster; I'll see your work to-morrow." Then, as before, the giant laid his head down on the floor with his head in Featherflight's lap. She combed his hair and brushed his head, and he fell fast asleep.

The next morning the giant called Jack into the farmyard earlier than before. "It is but fair to call you early, for I have work more than a strong man can well do." He showed him a heap of sand, saying: "Make me a rope to tether my herd of cows, that they may not leave the stalls before milking time." Then he turned on his heel, and went down the road laughing.

Jack took some sand in his hands, gave a twist, threw it down, went to the door, and called out: "Featherflight! Featherflight! this is beyond you: I feel myself already rolled in meal, and swallowed, bones and all."

Out came Featherflight, saying with good cheer: "Not so bad as that. Sit down, and we will plan what to do." They talked and planned all the day. Just before the giant came home, they went up to the top of the stairs to Jack's room; then Featherflight pricked Jack's finger and dropped a drop of blood on each of the three stairs. Then she came down and prepared the supper, which to-night was a brace of turkeys, three fat geese, five fat hens, six fat pigeons, seven fat woodcocks, and half a score of quail, with a jack-pudding.

When he had finished, the giant turned to Featherflight with a growl: "Why so sparing of food to-night? Is there no good meal in the larder? This boy whets my appetite. Well for you, young sir, if you have done your work. Is it done?" "No, sir," said Jack boldly. "I said I could do a day's work in a day as well as another, but no better." The giant said: "Featherflight, prick him for me with the larding needle, hang him in the chimney corner well wrapped in bacon, and give him to me for my early breakfast." Featherflight says: "Yes, father." Then, as before, the giant laid his head down on the floor with his head in Featherflight's lap. She combed his hair, and brushed his head, and he fell fast asleep.

Jack goes to bed, his room at the top of the stairs. As soon as the giant is snoring in bed, Featherflight softly calls Jack and says: "I have the keys of the treasure house; come with me." They open the treasure house, take out bags of gold and silver, and loosen the halter of the best horse in the best stall in the best stable. Jack mounts with Featherflight behind, and off they go. At three o'clock in the morning, not thinking of his order the night before, the giant wakes and calls, "Jack, get up." "Yes, sir," says the first drop of

blood. At four o'clock the giant wakes, turns over, and says, "Jack, get up." "Yes, sir," says the second drop of blood. At five o'clock the giant wakens, turns over, and says, "Jack, get up." "Yes, sir," says the third drop of blood. At six o'clock the giant wakens, turns over, and says, "Jack, get up," and there was no answer.

Then with great fury he says: "Featherflight has overslept herself; my breakfast won't be ready." He rushes to Featherflight's room; it is empty. He dashes downstairs to the chimney corner, to see if Jack is hanging there, and finds neither Jack nor Featherflight.

Then he suspects they have run away, and rushes back for his seven-leagued boots, but cannot find the key under his pillow. He rushes down, finds the door wide open, catches up his boots and rushes to the stable. There he finds that the best horse from the best stall from the best stable has gone. Jumping into his boots, he flies after them, swifter than the wind. The runaways had been galloping for several hours, when Jack hears a sound behind him, and, turning, sees the giant in the distance. "O Featherflight! Featherflight! all is lost!" But Featherflight says: "Keep steady, Jack, look in the horse's right ear, and throw behind you over your right shoulder what you find." Jack looks and finds a little stick of wood, throws it over his right shoulder, and then there grows up behind them a forest of hard wood. "We are saved," says Jack. "Not so certain," says Lady Featherflight, "but prick up the horse, for we have gained some time." The giant went back for an axe, but soon hacked and hewed his way through the wood, and was on the trail again. Jack again heard a sound, turned and saw the giant, and said to Lady Featherflight, "All is lost." "Keep steady, Jack," says Featherflight; "look in the horse's left ear, and throw over your left shoulder what you find." Jack looked, found a drop of water, throws it over his left shoulder, and between them and the giant there arises a large lake, and the giant stops on the other side, and shouts across, "How did you get over?" Featherflight calls, "We drank, and our horses drank, and we drank our way through." The giant shouts scornfully back, "Surely I am good for what you can do," and he threw himself down and drank, and drank, and drank, and then he burst.

Now they go on quietly till they come near to a town. Here they stop, and Jack says, "Climb this tree, and hide in the branches till I come with the parson to marry us. For I must buy me a suit of fine clothes before I am seen with a gay lady like yourself." So Featherflight climbed the tree with the thickest branches she could find, and waited there, looking between the leaves into a spring below. Now this spring was used by all the wives of the towns-

people to draw water for breakfast. No water was so sweet anywhere else ; and early in the morning they all came with pitchers and pails for a gossip, and to draw water for the kettle. The first who came was a carpenter's wife, and as she bent over the clear spring she saw, not herself, but Featherflight's lovely face reflected in the water. She looks at it with astonishment and cries, "What ! I, a carpenter's wife, and I so handsome ? No, that I won't," and down she threw the pitcher, and off she went.

The next who came was the potter's wife, and as she bent over the clear spring she saw, not herself, but Featherflight's lovely face reflected in the water. She looks at it with astonishment and cries, etc. (repeat as before ; in the same manner come the wives of the publican, scrivener, lace-maker, etc., etc.).

All the men in the town began to want their breakfast, and one after another went out into the market-place to ask if any one by chance had seen his wife. Each came with the same question and all received the same answers. All had seen them going, but none had seen them returning. They all began to fear foul play, and all together walked out toward the spring. When they reached it, they found the broken pitchers all about the grass, and the pails bottom upwards floating on the water. One of them, looking over the edge, saw the face reflected, and, knowing that it was not his own, looked up. Seeing Lady Featherflight, he called to his comrades : "Here is the witch, here is the enchantress. She has bewitched our wives. Let us kill her ;" and they began to drag her out of the tree, in spite of all she could say. Just at this moment Jack comes up, galloping back on his horse, with the parson up behind. You would not know the gayly dressed cavalier to be the poor, ragged boy who passed over the road so short a time before. As he came near he saw the crowd and shouted, "What's the matter ? What are you doing to my wife ?" The men shouted, "We are hanging a witch ; she has bewitched all our wives, and murdered them, for all we know." The parson bade them stop, and let the Lady Featherflight tell her own story. When she told them how their wives had mistaken her face for theirs, they were silent a moment, and then one and all cried, "If we have wedded such fools, they are well sped," and turning walked back to the town. The parson married Jack and Lady Featherflight on the spot, and christened them from the water of the spring, and then went home with them to the great house that Jack had bought as he passed through the town. There the newly married pair lived happily for many months, until Jack began to wish for more of the giant's treasure, and proposed that they should go back for it. But they could not cross the water. Lady Featherflight said, "Why not build a bridge ?" And the bridge was built. They went

over with wagons and horses, and brought back so heavy a load that, as the last wagonful passed over the bridge, it broke, and the gold was lost. Jack lamented and said, "Now we can have nothing more from the giant's treasure-house." But Lady Featherflight said, "Why not mend the bridge?"

So the bridge was mended,
And my story's ended.

Note. — In the Proceedings of the Second International Folk-Lore Congress (pp. 47-64) I have given a comparative discussion of this tale. I can here mention only the results arrived at, referring to the text of the article for detailed information. (See Bibliographical Notes, below).

The tale as here printed has lost an introductory section which related in what manner the hero, while on his way to the giant's castle, captures the feather-robe of a fairy, whom he finds bathing. The name Featherflight, therefore, refers to the original bird-form of the heroine, as indicated by her name (*La Plume Verte*) in the corresponding French version.

The tale as formerly narrated in England included the following sections. I. Introduction, describing how a youth comes to seek the habitation of a giant. II. Bird-maiden Story, as above mentioned. III. Tasks and Flight. IV. Forgetfulness of the Bride. The last section, as here given, has lost part of the ending. The hero, while in the house of his father, contrary to the injunctions laid on him, permits himself to be kissed, and falls into oblivion of his betrothed; he is about to be wedded to another, when his former love appears at the ceremony, and succeeds in reviving his memory.

The elements composing the folk-tale are found at an early period in Greek and also in Hindu literature.

To the part of the narrative relating to winning the bride, a parallel is offered by the story of Jason. The distant country to which the hero proceeds, in order to recover the Golden Fleece, was probably originally conceived as a land beyond the limits of the world of man. Medea falls in love with Jason, and aids him in accomplishing tasks closely analogous to those of our folk-tale. "The relationship with the *märchen* of the bird-wife is obvious, and cannot be accidental; but we do not learn that Medea had a bird form, or that Jason had known her before his journey. We must therefore regard the tale, not as a variant of the modern story, but as containing evidence of the existence in Greece, at an early period, of elements which, at a later time and in another country, entered into the composition of the folk-tale.

The Hindu legend of Purūvaras and Urvaçī, referred to in a well-known hymn of the Rig Veda, contains a different portion of our tale. The Vedic hymn describes the interview of the hero with the nymph after the latter has deserted him. The goddess remains obdurate to the entreaties of the mortal; but she consoles him with the promise of a son, who shall one day seek out his human parent. The poem accordingly depends upon a folk-

tale answering to the first section of our *märchen*, but suggesting the non-existence, at the time of composition, of the second section, that in which the nymph is sought for, and recovered from her own heavenly abode.

As taste became more romantic, the unfortunate ending of the relation became displeasing. We therefore perceive, in later Hindu versions of the Urvaçi story, attempts to bring about a reunion of the husband and wife. In this spirit, as the facts seem to allow the student to infer, a Hindu narrator of a period which cannot be determined with certainty, but which was probably earlier than our era, by the process of uniting tale-elements hitherto separated, composed a narrative which was essentially the same as that of our *märchen*; he had only to append, to a story similar to that of Urvaçi, a legend resembling that told of an expedition into giant-land, in order to complete his history. This narration lost nothing by repetition, and in course of time was expanded into a long oral Hindu romance, in which the several sections of the tale were set forth with much detail and at great length. The narrative became the theme of literary treatment and decoration; but the authors who occupied themselves with it, finding it too long to treat as a whole in the extended fashion which they preferred, contented themselves with developing one or another portion of the primitive account. Such versions are the tales of Janshah and of El Basrah, contained in the Arabian Nights, that respecting Manohara in the Thibetan Kandjur, and a corresponding Burmese drama; each of these histories is set forth with much detail, but no one includes all the portions of the original. On the other hand, not by writing, but by oral recitation, the tale in its entirety reached Madagascar, where it is still the most common of folk-tales, and has adopted a characteristic dress; some of the Malagasy versions would occupy nearly a hundred pages of this Journal, and would be found very different in language from our English variant, while corresponding so far as the essential idea is concerned.

The tale, as will be seen, is properly a two-act drama; the first act relates the capture and subsequent escape of the wife, the second her pursuit and recovery. It was natural that these two distinct sections should be blended into one; thus "Lady Featherflight" places the arrival of the hero at the giant's house immediately after his encounter with the heroine. This reduction appears to have been made in Asia, and at an early time, since it forms the basis of a version of Somadeva of Kashmir, whose collection was made about 1180. This work, for the most part, was translated from an earlier book, that of Gunadhya, dating back to our era: whether this particular tale was included in the original collection, I have not been able to discover. Be this as it may, it is observable that the similarity between the story of Somadeva and the modern folk-tale is not due to literary influence; writing has had no effect on the diffusion of the tale, which has lived entirely on the lips of the people; its history therefore constitutes a refutation of the mistaken doctrine that folk-tales as a class are derived from written literature.

It was probably in the Middle Age, and in some country of Central Europe, that a narrator had the idea of adding to the tale, thus simplified

and condensed, an additional section, relating to the forgetfulness of the bride, attributed to the hero ; a story which was derived from an independent source. With this addition, the tale obtained extensive currency in Europe, being so common in every country, and so modified by the process of oral transmission, that the number of recorded variants amount to many hundreds. I estimate that more than one tenth the contents of many European books of *märchen* are made up of variations of the tale of the "Bird-wife."

However, the older two-act drama, describing the quest of the abandoned husband, also appears in Europe, and has frequently attached itself to the modified versions, so as to make mixed forms.

The theme underwent literary treatment, as already shown in the *Pentamerone* of Basile (1574). About 1600, in Germany, Jacob Ayrer wrote a play on the subject, which, in some manner not easy to determine, is connected with the "Tempest" of Shakespeare.

A slight allusion in the version here printed shows its antiquity. The hero is spoken of as leaving his bride while he goes on to procure a parson. A version of Basile (1567) contains a similar explanation of his departure ; but the original idea is found in a Basque variant, which represents the heroine, as a heathen, to be unable to enter Christian land until she is baptized. It was therefore for christening, not marriage, that the priest was necessary.

From England, as seems likely, the story reached Jamaica, where it took the form of a negro tale. The European narrative became the basis of a ballad in Samoa, and perhaps of a tale of the Eskimo. Schoolcraft, in his "Algic Researches," gives two stories which appear to have had a similar origin.

Thus in all parts of the world, and without any regard to the different stages of civilization, this story has been welcomed, and in each country made to assume a form more or less characteristic. The diffusion of the tale seems to have followed the course of civilization and the interchange of trade, and to have spread from the more civilized races to those inferior in the scale, according to the usual course of folk-lore.

Such, as is probable, was the history of a narrative which has correctly been designated the most popular of all human compositions.

W. W. Newell.